

Heartless' Institutions: Critical Educators and University Feudalism

by

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Ferrer y Guardia and Jesús Gómez (Pato): Two Great Anarchist Educators

During the first hour Paulo Freire spent in Catalonia, he asked me about Ferrer i Guardia and his Modern Schools movement. Ferrer i Guardia was the most internationally relevant educator we ever had in Spanish history. He was a member of the cultural part of Catalonia's largest anarchist movement, which years later got the attention of writers like George Orwell (in his book *Homage to Catalonia*) and film makers like Ken Loach (in his film *Land and Freedom*).

This anarchism had a very important cultural dimension (Tiana, 1987; Solà, 1978). Low-schooled workers, after ten hours of work, had time not only to join political meetings but to also participate in reading circles where they read and commented on the best books of classic literature and the writings of authors such as Kropotkin (1906). The Modern School, founded by Ferrer i Guardia, was based on the sciences; arguments; rationality against the irrationalism; and teaching, for instance, the scientific findings of evolution theory instead of the creationism (Ferrer, 1913).

Ferrer suffered a defamation campaign which lasted until the Modern School closed in 1906 and his condemnation to death and execution in 1909. Albert Camus wrote about those events: "ignorant people murdered him and ignorance continues to be perpetuated today through new and tireless inquisitions. Nevertheless, in front of these, some victims – among them Ferrer – will live eternally." Camus was right; despite the tireless inquisitions that still happen today in institutions with feudal dynamics, people like Ferrer and Pato will live eternally.

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There are many mechanisms to exclude critical educators. Conservatives reject them because they are critical. Liberals¹ accept them when they are isolated or they do not have success. But when critical educators have intellectual and personal success, liberals also become deeply aggressive against them; when this is the case, the ideological opposition of conservatives combined with liberals' professional and personal jealousy becomes extremely destructive. This feudal context functions in the capitalist system, in the same way capitalist interests use education (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997; Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001), to impede the development of critical groups within its institutions.

During Franco's dictatorship, institutions directly eliminated the critical educators, first just killing them and later by excluding them; they did not care about the opinion of the general public. However, during periods of democracy, like the time of Ferrer's persecution, first there is often the development of a successful defamation campaign towards critical educators in order to create public support for their elimination. Years after Ferrer i Guardia's execution, Francesc Cambó, a key politician from Catalonia said, "[a]ll the Barcelona citizens we have executed Ferrer by no asking for his amnesty." (Speech at the Spanish Parliament in 1914). Pato suffered both exclusion and defamation. During Franco dictatorship, he was expelled from the university because of his involvement in the struggle for freedom. During democracy he, like Ferrer, suffered a campaign of defamation.

Like Ferrer, Pato was a peaceful anarchist. During the political transition to democracy, he belonged to the anarchist union CNT and played a key role in the movement to turn the hospital where he worked into a public health institution. When he engaged in education, he soon became the closest friend of Paulo Freire in Spain. They talked about the School for Adults, La Verneda; about the Dialogic Literary Gatherings; and about the project of transforming schools into Learning Communities.² But mainly, they talked about love and friendship.

Pato was a revolutionary in all dimensions of life. What usually is a monotone task like buying a newspaper or to going into a library became an extraordinary moment when this was done by Pato. Several years ago, he spent a month at Harvard, and one of the emails we received when he died explained that the doorman of the library still remembers him very well.

He started to teach at the lowest rank at the university when he was 47. His salary was very low, but he liked the friendships he made with most of the members of his department. His way changed everything. Students, professors, waiters, doorkeepers sparked with his enthusiasm and availability. Experts in research methods became interested in his proposal of critical communicative methodology. The public defense of his dissertation about love had to be done in a theatre, which was full of people.

Full-time professors felt impressed by such a quick and great success in different ways. Many reacted with pleasure at having such an incredible person among them, and some became his close friends. Others felt disturbed by such a distortion of the traditional hierarchies. Some felt threatened by the success and

outreach of his revolutionary ideas, which went far beyond what they taught and wrote.

Egalitarian Dialogue Beyond Hierarchies

Every two weeks, Pato participated in the three-hour plenary session with most members of CREA (around seventy people). The debates were “with the book at hand.”³ During the session, the habit was to say: “on page 74, the author states...”, rather than just saying “this author states...” In this way, they avoided the common practice of talking and writing about what one has not directly read.⁴ The dialogue was egalitarian; the value of contributions was the argument provided, rather than the academic position of the speaker.⁵ The members participated from the different disciplines they belonged to (i.e. pedagogy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, communication, biology, linguistics) and the different topics they were working on (i.e. gender studies, migration, Romà studies, education, etc.).

This dialogic process made the intellectual learning extraordinary. Students had the opportunity to have egalitarian debates with professors and colleagues. Professors felt pushed to read the texts carefully in order to maintain a clever dialogue. The debates also generated many ideas for the transformation of the social practices in which the different members engaged. Besides, there was a positive human climate; Pato and others always contributed insights and reflections full of feelings and humor.

Unfortunately, the traditional hierarchies of the university disapproved of the rigor of this debate. In Spain, the academic career has several steps. Some of them are: doctoral student, assistant professor, full time professor and *catedrático*. Each step must pass through a committee composed of members of the upper categories. The *catedráticos* dominate these committees, and therefore decide who will pass to the next step. In order to fail the other candidates, some *catedráticos* do not need to present arguments in an egalitarian dialogue; they can even say ignorant things because nobody can question their authority of decision under some current university laws. They do not even need to read the works presented by the different candidates; in fact, they do not need to read books at all because they can say what they want. Fortunately, there are also *catedráticos* with a great intellectual and social commitment and some of them supported Pato.

Because they are always “right” in the committees that decide academic careers, they are “right” everywhere: in classes, in seminars and even in informal conversations. If the debate is about a book, they do not need to have read it; they are “right” because they have the power position. These feudal relations do not stimulate academic reading, it rather promotes the habit of speaking and writing about what one has never read.

Pato was too intelligent and too revolutionary to avoid tensions in this atmosphere. However, these troubles grew even more when he took a stance about

gender violence in universities and supported the gender studies group of CREA in their struggle to “break the silence”. Then, a very aggressive defamation campaign started against him and other colleagues. The huge personal damage caused to them was partly relieved thanks to international solidarity statements from relevant scholars worldwide, who denounced such unjust and unethical attacks.

Communicative Research

Pato developed a communicative methodology of research which was very successful in the European Union’s Framework Program of research (Gómez & Flecha, 2004). This methodology includes both dialogue between disciplines (interdisciplinarity) and egalitarian dialogue within the subjects.

To create interdisciplinary research groups is very difficult in Spanish universities because the feudal hierarchies are organized by disciplines. Some *catedráticos* only feel safe with members of the same discipline. Because they will not take part in the committees for the promotion of members from other disciplines, they cannot have their submission.

Pato crossed the borders of this feudal organization. He was an active member of an interdisciplinary center with research projects and debates based on argument and not on hierarchies. The plenary sessions provided the younger members of the center with much more knowledge than that of many professors of the higher categories. Some *catedráticos* felt uncomfortable with these young scholars who were used to an interdisciplinary and egalitarian intellectual debate. Those who used to speak and write, for instance, about Habermas without having read his books could thus be challenged by a doctoral student who had read them. While this is excellent for the intellectual level of debates and for quality work at the university, is bad for those who can only maintain their reputation with the submission of the others.

Besides interdisciplinarity, the communicative methodology of research promoted by Pato includes the people and marginalized groups in scientific dialogue with researchers and scholars (Gómez et al, 2003). For instance, he was responsible for the methodology in the research project *Workaló* (Crea, 2000-2003) and also in the project “Included” (Crea, 2006-2011), both funded by the European Commission. The former study was conducted with the direct participation of Romà people and organizations. The scientific contributions from the study helped to overcome many stereotypes that can be found in mainstream research about cultural minorities, particularly about the Romà (Macedo & Gounari, 2006; Vargas & Gómez, 2003). As an example, in the final conference of the project, there were representatives from the European and National Parliaments. A member of the Spanish Parliament presented a member of a Romà women’s association in one of the sessions. She was illiterate, but the conclusions she explained were later approved with unanimity by both the European Parliament and at the Spanish Parliament.

Pato was an enthusiastic worker. Even during his last semester, when he could not be in charge of courses due to his illness, he continued to give lectures to the classes of other professors and to work on the last revisions of a book about this critical communicative research methodology. On May 4 to 6, 2006, he expected to present his perspective for second time (Gómez & Latorre, 2005) at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois, a conference organized by, among others, Norman Denzing. He finally could not go. Doctors said he had just a very short time left. However, he still had a good life during three months; he even made a last trip to the Basque Country, where his childhood memories centered.

Pato's Dream of Universities with Heart

In his brief stay at the university, Pato enlightened any space and time with his *brillo en los ojos* (shine in the eyes). His awareness about the influence of jealousy and corporatism in the daily life of this academic institution did not diminish his enthusiasm to open oases of solidarity, feelings, social commitment and scientific quality. He gave everything to the university -- hard work, his international and social reputation, friendship, struggle against gender violence -- but he suffered a lot under the defamations that did not stop even when all his doctors said he needed calm in order to reduce the possibility of metastasis. He was too intelligent, too creative, too revolutionary, and too sensitive for the current structures of our universities.

When Paulo Freire died, Jerome Bruner sent us an email to remind us that we needed to continue the work Freire had initiated: “[h]e was a brave man as well as a far-sighted one. He made us aware of our mindless cruelties, and now the challenge to all of us is to do something about those cruelties.” Pato have also left us with a challenge. We will never forget him; his dream of a university with heart is alive. Many people from Spain and from all over the world continue his struggle, which will last until educators like him can be safe in these academic institutions.

Notes

- 1 In Spain, liberal educators do not use the word “liberal”; they frequently call themselves “critical,” but they produce neither critical theory nor practices. In fact, as Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (1995) put it, the new conservatives repeatedly use the word “critical” and eliminate its political and cultural dimensions.
- 2 To know more about these transformative educational practices see Sánchez Aroca (1999) and Gómez (2002)
- 3 They have read and discussed about 150 books by Simone de Beauvoir (1993/1949), Adam Smith (1998/1776), Jürgen Habermas (1984/1981), Paulo Freire (1970), Max Weber (1978/1922) and others.
- 4 As he recognized in his book *The future lasts a long time* (1993), Althusser wrote *Reading Capital* without having read Marx's *Capital*.

- 5 In the way proposed by Habermas (1984), with validity claims rather than power claims, or even better, grounding the debates in dialogic rather than power interactions (Searle & Soler, 2004).

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